



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

PURIM IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

EQUITY · DIVERSITY · INCLUSION

WHAT IS PURIM?

Purim (pronounced “pooh-REEM”) is a joyous Jewish festival celebrated on the 14th of Adar - the twelfth month of the ecclesiastical year on the Hebrew calendar, roughly corresponding with February or March. Purim is the Hebrew word for “lots”, as in the drawing of lots. In 2023, Purim begins at sunset on March 6 and ends on the evening of March 7.

Purim is the story of Queen Esther, and a celebration of the survival of the Jewish people in fifth century BCE Persia. The story says that King Ahasuerus had an advisor called Haman, who became incensed when the Queen Esther’s uncle Mordechai, a Jewish citizen, refused to bow to him. In revenge, Haman convinced the king to give him the right to destroy the Jewish people, and then drew lots to decide the day on which he would carry out his plot. Ahasuerus was unaware, however, that his new queen, Esther, was Jewish. She eventually confronted the king and revealed her identity. Haman was arrested and hanged, but since no royal decree could be revoked, Ahasuerus instead issued a new proclamation giving the Jewish people the right to defend themselves. On the day marked for their extinction, the 13th of Adar, the Jewish people fought and defeated their attackers.

This narrow escape from annihilation was celebrated the next day, on the 14th of Adar, and Haman has come to be a symbol of early antisemitism.

HOW IS PURIM CELEBRATED?

Some Jews prepare to celebrate the holiday by fasting from daybreak until sundown on the day before Purim in what is known as the “**Fast of Esther**”. Celebrations begin with the reading of the Megillah, which tells the story of Esther. It is read in synagogues in both the evening and the morning to a congregation including children who may be dressed in costume, and who make noise whenever Haman’s name is mentioned. It is also customary to give gifts to friends and the less fortunate.

These gifts are called “**mishloah manot**”. A traditional Purim food is “**hamantaschen**”, a three-cornered pastry (so shaped to look like Haman’s three-cornered hat) bursting with poppy seeds or another sweet filling. The festival concludes with a meal shared with family and friends.

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

1 **Get educated.** Ensure staff who supervise self-identified Jewish colleagues are aware of Purim and how they can be supportive.

2 **Intentional planning and accommodations.** Update your scheduling tools to reflect religious observance dates and to support the planning activities. Some community members might be fasting on March 6. Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events during Purim if possible.

The University of Toronto recognizes its obligation to prevent discriminatory impacts on members of its community that arise from the failure to accommodate based on religion or creed. It is the responsibility of both the Manager and the individual seeking accommodation to work cooperatively and respectfully to explore and implement appropriate accommodation options. Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to switch shifts to observe Purim. Look for solutions that suit all parties.

3 **Be thoughtful.** To wish someone “Happy Purim,” you can say “Chag Purim Sameach” [khahg poo-REEM sah-MAY-akh], or “Chag Sameach”.

4 **Don’t make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all who celebrate Purim will take time off, but they may still observe in various ways.